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The Modern Rewriting of Witches

How the figure of the witch is being reborn in literature and popular culture to connect to and perform their diverse history

Abstract:

This thesis argues that there is a movement in literature and television shows beginning in the 2010s which attempts to recast the figure of the witch and connect more accurately to their historic roles which are long forgotten in popular culture. As a group of women who faced legal, religious and physical persecution, the figure of the witch has been transformed over time to be frequently depicted as a green-faced, immoral figure of evil, losing accuracy in modern depictions and detaching from historical accuracy. In particular, this thesis will use *Circe* by Madeline Miller, *The Year of the Witching* by Alexis Henderson and *Pine* by Francis Toon as well as television examples such as *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* and *American Horror Story: Coven*. In Chapter 1 I will focus on the reconnection to the role of the witch as an early nurse, specifically focusing on Miller's *Circe*. In Chapter 2 I will analyse the role of the witch as a mother and the connection to the patriarchy, concentrating on Toon's *Pine*. Lastly, Chapter 3 discusses the witches' link to religion and the occult, focusing on the aforementioned television shows and Henderson's *The Year of the Witching*. Significantly, the findings of this thesis have demonstrated that there is undoubtedly a movement to depict the witch more accurately, demonstrating how popular culture examples can more precisely create forms of entertainment that enrich historical understanding rather than detract from it.

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Chapter One: Madeline Miller's Circe and the Connection to Nursing	8
Chapter Two: Motherhood and the Missing Witch	18
Chapter Three: Witches and the Occult	25
Conclusion	35
Works Cited	38

Chapter 1: Introduction

“for it is only by keeping this memory alive that we can prevent it from being turned against us”
(Federici 86).

“Never in history have women been subjected to such a massive, internationally organized, legally approved, religiously blessed assault on their bodies” (Federici 36).

The figure of the witch in popular culture has long been one that encourages contempt, scorn and repulsion through her characterisation; a characterisation that is incredibly misplaced and historically inaccurate. Often this characterisation is aligned to their physicality, with most depicting a similar portrayal of a green-faced, pointy-nosed villain cackling as they fly on a broom; an image that is strongly embedded in Halloween costumes and perhaps one of the most famous depictions, the Witch from *The Wizard of Oz*. The word “witch” first appeared in the late 800s and later developed into both “Wicche” and “Wicca” before taking the form it has today, though was not used immediately to denote uses of magic, but rather, was more closely aligned to tribal religion separate from that of Christianity in England (Oxford English Dictionary). Sinead Spearing researched the history of witches and medicine and found that the term “witch” evolved from the Hwicce tribe, although states that the reason for this development of the term “is yet to be answered” (92). Nevertheless, in today’s culture the witch conjures a strong and unified image for most, and one that is strictly female but namely that of a magic-wielding, evil figure who is typically, old, jealous, conventionally unattractive and cunning. However, recently, there has been a trend in literature and in popular culture to depict the witch more favourably, demonstrating a shift in perspective and in particular, this essay will aim to demonstrate that there is a conscious effort being made by female creators to recast the figure of the witch more accurately and away from the aforementioned connotations of evil, instead focusing on a connection to the figure’s deep and varied history. In particular, the witches’ role as an early nurse and medical professional, as the anti-patriarchal figure as well as the connection to religion and the occult, showing that recent novels from the late 2010s have successfully reconnected and recast the figure of the witch to keep their connection to their diverse history alive and to challenge current

stereotypes. It is through this attempt to reconnect and recast the history in popular culture and fiction that it can, as Silvia Federici states, keep the memory alive (86).

As outlined by Michel Foucault in his lecture, "Truth and Juridical Reforms", the power in determining what becomes knowledge is intertwined with political and economic conditions and this is no different for the figure of the witch who for centuries was undoubtedly the victim of legal and economic conditions that worked against her. As Foucault rightfully states, "The political and economic conditions of existence are not a veil or an obstacle for the subject of knowledge, but the means by which subjects of knowledge are formed, and hence are truth relations" (15). In the case of the witch, the institutions of power, namely the Church and the government, held political, religious and economic power and it is through this that they were able to create the image of the witch, benefitting their motives and further perpetuating their control. Knowledge of the witch, or supposed truths, were therefore not only a creation from the institutions of power but they cannot be analysed as such without viewing them in light of their connection to such institutions. Foucault states that "There cannot be particular types of subjects of knowledge, orders of truth, or domains of knowledge except on the basis of political conditions that are the very ground on which the subject, the domains of knowledge, and the relations with truth are formed" (15). The creation of the witch and witch hunts originally stemmed from a divine knowledge accessible only to the Church and government, condemning women to a fate that was viewed as truth and which has subsequently become misconstrued and evolved in popular culture. As outlined in the aforementioned quotations from Silvia Federici, the true history of the persecution has been lost and evolved through popular culture and it is only through mediation that this can be remembered. Through literature, it is possible to recast these images to be more historically accurate and to depict the lost knowledge of their persecutions in light of this connection to the institutions of political, religious and economic power which had successfully created them.

This thesis will also employ Ann Rigney's article, "Remembrance as Remaking: Memories of the Nation Revisited", to demonstrate that the memory of the historic persecution of witches is indeed a memory that requires mediation in popular culture art forms to ensure it does not fade and is

represented accurately. Although Rigney's article focuses on the Holocaust, as well as outlines the differences between myth and memory, her analysis functions as a useful model to investigate the figure of the witch and the history of witches' persecution that occurred through legal, religious and scientific grounds. Although the figure of the witch has been subject to persecution and condemnation, it is also a character that has transcended into popular culture as a monstrous figure; often the figure who must be destroyed. As stated by Rigney, "remembrance is the active principle whereby myths are not just reproduced but also slowly reconfigured. Memory – especially the memory of recent events – can work against the power that myths have acquired over much longer periods of time" (242-243). As the witch has become a figure of both myth and reality as well as a symbol of monstrosity in popular culture, Rigney's analysis of remembrance allows us to see how art can cross the boundaries of, connect to, and reflect history. Using art forms such as literature is just one way how myths can be dispelled and the historic memory kept alive.

Although witchcraft accusations and hunts still exist globally today, this essay will mainly focus on Western European history relating to witchcraft, although some primary fictional texts are written by North American authors. For the purpose of analysing depictions and as much of the popular culture images of witches align with those from the United States, it is not necessary to distinguish and analyse by region although future analysis could certainly investigate the potential for differences. Ultimately, though the demonisation of witches began in Europe, it transcended borders and influenced how witches were perceived in North America (Braudy 45-6). Much of the North American examples outlined in this thesis take elements of the witches' history from Europe and North America to depict the figure of the witch.

However, as the figure of the monstrous witch has many similarities across regions, this essay will mainly focus upon how the historic memory of the witches can be successfully used to challenge pre-existing stereotypes. Thus, this essay aims to prove that the figure of the witch is being re-remembered and myths are being recast within popular culture through literature; mostly limited to the Anglo-speaking markets, though this remembrance is not regionally specific enough to warrant separate sections and analyses by location. Whilst there is a plethora of historical and sociological

academic research into the figure of the witch, witchcraft and witch-hunts, such as that by Silvia Federici, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, research into fictional depictions is incredibly limited despite its influence on memory and myths. Despite this absence in academia, the figure of the witch is undergoing a revival in art and popular culture, being further propelled by popularised fantasy forms and the commercial successes of these fantasy stories in the Young Adult genre and on Television, where evidence of such success for fantasy forms can be seen in one of the most successful to date, *Game of Thrones*. This commerciality and the rich history of the witch equates to a large amount of source material for authors and creators to draw from. This thesis aims to not only address this gap but to also illuminate other areas for potential research into representations of witches and their historical accuracy in the hope that the mass persecution of the witch and the subsequent transformation of them can gain the same recognition and accuracy as other atrocities in fictional depictions such as those of the Holocaust and War narratives; depictions of which have recently also received a revival in literary and media forms.

Using Madeline Miller's *Circe*, Francine Toon's *Pine*, Alexis Henderson's *The Year of the Witching*, and a contemporary television show; *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, this essay will aim to demonstrate that they each depict relevant historical connections which contribute to disrupting harmful stereotypes of the witch. Namely, these are depicting the witch's connection to the medical profession, their link to motherhood and the patriarchy and their relationship to the occult and religion. Whilst each example does perform slightly differently, they all move away from stereotypical depictions of witches which can often be found in contemporary examples, providing the modern-day audience with greater historical accuracy and remembrance of this conflicted yet highly popularised figure. In Chapter 1, I will discuss Madeline Miller's *Circe* and demonstrate how Miller appropriates the figure from Homer's epic to more accurately connect to the history of witches as early nurses and healers. Then, in Chapter 2 I will discuss how the witch is being depicted as an anti-patriarchal figure and one who has a complicated history with motherhood and the institution of the family, namely demonstrating that the witch mother is possible. Lastly, in Chapter 3, the connection to religion and the occult will be analysed to show how modern adaptations in both literature and

Television have reversed the historical connection to religion and the occult, allowing witch narratives to draw power from their history rather than be persecuted by it.

Throughout this essay, the term 'witch' will be used, although it is important to note that this did not gain its significance immediately, with the very first forms of the term being first used during the reign of King Alfred in the late 800s (Spearing 92). Although this term in itself holds a lot of cultural and stereotypical images to the modern reader, even when the term was first being used it did not hold specific negative connotations and it was not until one hundred years later that it gained its use to define sorcery (Spearing 97). As a result, when analysing fictional texts and their performances in relation to the history of witchcraft, it is beneficial to keep in mind that connotations of evil, sorcery, widowhood and the Devil amongst other associations have occurred over hundreds of years to generate the image a modern reader has associated with the witch today.

Chapter One: Madeline Miller's Circe and the Connection to Nursing

The character of Circe has come to be regarded as a representation of early witchcraft in literature and art, although what a modern reader would attribute to the figure of the witch is not immediately recognisable in Homer's depiction of Circe, as there are no particularly maleficent and wicked displays of power that one would attribute to the witch today. Instead, her main source of danger is her alluring voice and the potential for her to transform the men into animals; a feat that is quickly reversed as she is outsmarted by the protagonist, Odysseus. Circe has become a frequent focus for reinvention and within the rich and often complex history of witchcraft, Circe has more connections to this than would first be considered in *The Odyssey*.

Although it is easy to describe Circe as a witch, or her acts of transformation and potions as witchcraft, these can be susceptible to modern interpretations which are unfortunately tainted with connotations of evil and the occult. Circe's character was created long before witch hunts began or any notions of witchcraft were apparent and has no connection to the Devil or religion, thus removing her from European notions of what a witch is or was. In fact, the term itself was not in use at the time

of *The Odyssey*'s composition and thus, Circe has a far stronger connection to a healer than what would now be considered a witch. However, Circe has become synonymous with the term and, therefore, to reclaim and repurpose this story is an important act of taking control of the history of witchcraft and something that Madeline Miller is able to do in her 2018 interpretation. For the purpose of this essay, as an exploration of the historical connection of witchcraft to modern adaptations and retellings in literature, these terms will be maintained as it is vital to reclaim this connection and transform the negative connotations that accompany them. Circe's powers will be referred to as witchcraft but note that this does not link them to any sign of the occult, religion or demonic practice, instead being far more closely attributed to the history of medicine and herbal remedies. In fact, in Greek culture, magic was a trusted practice as outlined by Marina Montesano who states, "magical aid was sought in a great number of situations (and was provided) as there was a common, shared belief in the efficacy of magic. [...] Further, there was as yet nothing like Christian theology, which would later intervene to ban magic, and would hold all mythological accounts within its purview" (26). As a result, to understand how Circe has been transformed into a figure that comes to embody more recent cultural connotations of witchcraft, it is important to view the character through the lens of Greek culture and beliefs, to better understand how a recasting of Circe by Madeline Miller is performing the historic links to magic.

From section ten of *The Odyssey*, we are first introduced to the character of Circe and quickly learn that she has some attributes similar to the stereotypical witch figure we know today. Circe exists in solitude, is unmarried, is shunned from society, utilises magic and those who come across her are warned that she is not to be trusted. Although scholars such as Morena Montesano have suggested that, "*The Odyssey* gives her a personality and a story" (11), this is not strictly true, as a lot of Circe's actions seem inexplicable and deliberately elusive, and her personality does not extend much further than her desirability seen through the gaze of the sailors who come to her island. Whilst it is certainly true that Circe is a character that "does not have to be simply good or evil" (Montesano 13), she is one whose actions largely go unchecked during the meetings between herself and Odysseus, turning men into animals without explanation, for instance. Homer's Circe never truly gains a voice of her own

and instead, she is shown within the confines of Odysseus's descriptions which largely centre on her beauty and voice whilst she performs the maternal, caring roles for him and his men.

Circe's house, built of polished stone. Prowling about the place were mountain wolves and lions that Circe had bewitched with her magic drugs. They did not attack my men, but rose on their hind legs to fawn on them [...] They could hear Circe within, singing with her beautiful voice as she went to and fro at her great and everlasting loom, on which she was weaving one of those delicate, graceful and dazzling fabrics that goddesses make (Homer 130)

In this opening quotation, we learn that Circe has a beautiful home, an alluring voice and is making fabrics when Odysseus first spots her; this is the opposite image of a witch that possesses tremendous powers of transformation and instead depicts a romanticised image of a domesticated Circe. As a result, her character is conveyed to readers in a reductive form, not helped by the lack of her own voice in her portrayal, as she acts as both a Goddess and a mortal while also performing traditional caring roles.

However, this is not always the case in the Classical stories, as noted by Carla-Uhink and Irene Berti, who state, "In the Ovidian narration, Circe is beautiful, richly clad and lives in a sumptuous palace of marble halls yet she is also a fearful sorceress who is both vindictive and jealous" (82). Circe, therefore, is a figure that is a focus of reinvention and one that has become to be widely rewritten or portrayed as what would now be called, a witch. Whilst this essay will largely focus on the comparison of Homer's Circe to that of a recent reinvention of Circe by Madeline Miller, it is important to note that Circe has been transformed within narratives for hundreds of years and in fact, this more fearful portrayal from Ovid was also "transmitted to the Middle Ages" (Berti and Carla-Uhink 82). As a result, she has remained a figure of interest and reinvention, yet has never been able to gain a voice of her own within these stories, let alone receive the opportunity to be presented as a rounded character with justification for her treatment of the males she encounters. With the subsequent reinvention in 2018 by Madeline Miller, we now have a feminist retelling that finally connects Circe to the history of witchcraft and their roles as early nursing professionals, reframing the story away from one of a man-hating witch into one of complex human emotion and healing; a forgotten role performed by women who came to be known and shunned by society.

In Homer's introduction to Circe, we are immediately alerted to the fact that Circe is capable of producing enchanting magic, as Odysseus tells us that the animals are under the control of her "magic drug" (130). This consequently only adds to the alluring image we gain of Circe from these descriptions, who is first described as a "beautiful" and a "formidable goddess with a mortal woman's voice" (128) in a house of "polished stone" (130). Circe's character is one of many confinements across multiple levels, as she remains banished and alone on the island of Aea, in her polished stone house, neither Goddess nor mortal and largely defined for us by the hero Odysseus. This lack of a voice and community is something that is never explained in *The Odyssey*, reducing Circe to become a figure of danger but also one of comfort, eventually helping Odysseus and his men after he has outsmarted her. In this sense, Circe also connects to the more contemporary images of witches, who are often outcasts, possess magical abilities and if beaten in a challenge and spared to live, are able to help the protagonist on their journey, normally in exchange for something in return.

Often in contemporary narratives that feature witches, she is reduced to a figure that must be outsmarted, tricked or used to provide something to aid in the hero's quest. Examples of such include the witches in Neil Gaiman's *Stardust*, who are outsmarted and fail in their quest to steal the power of a star, the White Witch from C. S. Lewis's *The Lion The Witch and the Wardrobe*, who loses to Aslan's greater knowledge of ancient magic, and Maleficent from Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* who must be destroyed to break the curse. In the case of Circe, this is one area of her tale that has permeated contemporary narratives and depictions of witches. In the case of *The Odyssey*, Circe gains companionship, social interaction and also lovers from her encounters with men who visit her island. However, this still reduced her narrative to one that is completely isolated and dependent on people visiting her rather than giving her autonomy. Nevertheless, this is something that Miller is able to reverse and expand through her narrative, allowing Circe to regain her mortal voice but also her witch/Goddess powers with complete control, adding depth, emotion and reason to her character. Not only does this permit her to become a figure that cannot be so easily dominated by the males of the story, but it also connects more closely to her identity and the history of witchcraft as early nurses,

making for a meaningful retelling in a “transferable form” (Rigney 243) which can help to remember this history.

Moreover, what also exudes from this opening passage is that Circe is a desirable figure, and one that presents a danger, but ultimately one who is yet another challenge for Odysseus on his quest. When Odysseus seeks help for how to return his men to normal after Circe has transformed them into pigs, he is warned: “But make her swear a solemn oath by the blessed Gods not to try any more of her tricks on you, or when she has you stripped naked she may rob you of your courage and your manhood” (132). In this statement, the two things that are deemed most precious for Odysseus are the courage he needs to be able to finish his quest and his manhood. It is here that an obvious link can be made to Sigmund Freud’s definition of castration anxiety, a theory that describes this fear of losing the male genital organ as a consequence of incestuous desires for the mother and contempt for the father in childhood (Springer). Freud describes this fear as being “subsequently remembered by consciousness with corresponding reluctance” (217). This then produces “value set upon that organ and is quite extraordinarily deep and persistent” (Freud 217) and it is this value that is being demonstrated by Odysseus in his fears of castration at the hands of Circe.

This fear of castration plays into the notion that the most dangerous thing that can happen to a man is to be robbed of his sex and ability to continue his line of power in the patriarchal system, rendering him to a much lower social status. The witch has often been long associated with such fears and her status as existing outside of the patriarchal and heteronormative family structures has been viewed as part of the reason why a witchcraft accusation can occur. Cristina Santos analysed the functions of female monsters in popular culture and concluded that “women are judged and idealized into mother roles that are fundamentally set up based on their biological functions through historic, scientific and religious ideologies” (59). With Circe’s existence outside the realms of the conventional family setup and with her magical abilities, it becomes clear why she was attributed to the dangers of castration; an irrational yet prominent fear for the time when producing an heir is of utmost importance. Montesano also rightfully points out that in Greek culture, “women were defined in relation to maternity, and a woman without children bordered on the realm of the demonic” (35).

Although Circe is a powerful deity in her own right, she is also half-mortal and therefore, her lack of children becomes a signal for fear in Greek culture, a connection that witches in general, especially in popular culture, have always struggled to combat as they are often portrayed as bitter and jealous of the mothers around them.

In what Santos describes as the “phallogocentric marketplace” (90), the fear of a woman who is sexually liberated and poses a potential challenge to the traditional institutions of marriage and patriarchal family manifests itself in the figure of the witch. Undoubtedly, Circe is viewed through such a lens by Odysseus and his men; an image of temptation and a suggestion that she must be outwitted and then domesticated. The childless, exiled Circe is not free to leave the island and live peacefully and instead must wait for the men to come to her, portraying an image that she is open to challenge at the will of men; this is something Miller is able to reverse in her narrative. This image of Circe is reflected upon by Carla-Uhink and Irene as this permeated art for many years to come: “In these works, which were a basic source for artists and writers, the goddess Circe is the most obvious allegory of the lustful female sensuality who threatens virtue and reason” (82). This threat to virtue and reason is never truly explained in *The Odyssey*, with it only being alluded to, although undoubtedly the fears of castration and her existence outside of patriarchal control are causes for concern. As evidenced earlier, she also likely threatens virtue through the fact that she has no children and seemingly has no desire to either. With Circe as a largely voiceless figure for one whose voice is a prominent enticement for nearby soldiers, the reinvention of Homer’s tale is vital to recast and provide Circe with emotion, a voice, and a connection to her identity within a modern context.

Miller’s 2018 recreation of Circe manages to redefine a character that has largely been talked around but not confronted directly in literature since *The Odyssey*. By casting a feminist and human light upon the story of Circe, Miller has been able to capture the voice that Homer omits and offer a narrative for the first time. The character of Circe is often described as a witch but this link is never truly explored within literature, and often when it is, it is repeating the images that have been passed down through the ages which primarily focus on her femininity and lustfulness. With it, these images can also often project a man-hating, dangerous figure who fits the stereotypes of many witch-related

crimes such as that of sexual promiscuity, in what Santos would describe as the “phallogocentric marketplace” (90). As Rigney describes, “remembrance is not about repeating the same story over and over again. As a communicative practice, it is fundamentally transferable and this means that remembrance is also a resource for redefining the borders between ‘them’ and ‘us’” (253). Whilst Rigney is not directly linking redefining the borders of memory through the use of literature, it is quite clearly one way of changing the public discourse and an effective way in which the portrayal of witches in popular culture can be redefined or at least, challenged. As the figure of the witch has transferred successfully across borders to become an often fear-inducing monster similar to that of a zombie in popular culture, the memory of the persecution and rich history has ultimately been lost during this transference.

Miller’s redefining of the borders of the witch occurs from the very beginning of the novel, where Circe states, “When I was born, the name for what I was did not exist” (1). Instantly, Madeline Miller is making an obvious yet underlying connection to the history of the witch as well as one that ties into the name in Greek mythology for the half-human, half-Goddess; more commonly referred to as a nymph. Whilst it is not widely known, the term ‘witch’ was also a word that was created for control by Christian leaders to redefine an English tribe, originally known as *Mildþryþ*, who as part of their traditions made use of herbs in their healing practices (Spearing 45). Like Circe, this tribe also had a name granted to them that did not necessarily define who they were and eventually lost power over their name. This process of renaming and redefining the tribe who were known for their healing began, as Sinéad Spearing outlines, due to steps initiated by “A pagan who converted to Christianity in the fourth century” (63), in answer to the “medical practice [as] an established lineage of female pagan practice” (90). However, evidence has shown that the tribe were positioned at the forefront of medical practice, as their “healing books contain extensive and often elaborate remedies and prescriptions surrounding fertility, conception, pregnancy and childbirth” (89). In a similar manner to Circe, the tribe lost their identity but were exceptionally skilled in their use of herbs and medicine, an identity that Miller is able to connect to the character of Circe to help redefine the identity of the witch in popular culture. In fact, at times in the novel, the line between Goddess and mortal are blurred as

Circe states, “Let me say what sorcery is not: it is not divine power, which comes with a thought and a blink. It must be made and worked, planned and searched out, dug up, dried, chopped and ground, cooked, spoken over and sung. Even after all that, it can fail, as gods do not” (72). The image that Circe creates is not one associated with Godly powers, despite being half-Goddess, and it is certainly not the image that Homer portrays of her when she enchants the men with her “magic drug” (130). Instead, this practical approach towards her craft is exactly like that of the Mildþryþ tribe, who also relied on years of experimentation with medicinal herbs to guide their healing abilities.

The long-forgotten tradition of women as early nurses and community healers has also been written about by Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English in *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers*. In this, Ehrenreich and English detail how “for centuries women were doctors without degrees, barred from books and lectures, learning from each other, and passing on experience from neighbor to neighbor and mother to daughter” (1). It is clear to see how the patriarchal institution of power, namely the government, wielded its power to exert control over women who were founding medical practices. Using Foucault’s ideas from “Truth and Juridical Reforms”, this would be one example of how the political and economic conditions have formed this area of knowledge and subsequently reduced the knowledge of women as early medical professionals to the sideline. Whilst the two examples of research into women as early nurses are talking about different time periods, it exemplifies how durable this restriction on women in the medical practice was and demonstrates how it has fed into the conception of what a witch is today.

Moreover, what Miller is also able to connect to is the practice of singing and healing in addition to women as experienced midwives. Whilst Miller draws a lot of her details from the original Greek texts, and her knowledge as a classicist herself (Miller, “Madeline Miller - the Author”), there are undeniable connections to the history of witches that contribute to this redefining of the borders of witchcraft in popular culture. An example of this can be found when Circe states, “I did not know even the simplest herb-lore that any mortal would learn at her mother's knee: the wort plants boiled made a sort of soap, that yew burnt in the hearth sent up a choking smog, that poppies had sleep in their veins and hellebore death, and yarrow could close over wounds.” (73). Although this might be

easily overlooked, this is precisely the knowledge that the aforementioned researchers explored, detailing how women were often inheriting knowledge of herbal and medicinal remedies before they became known as the witches we think of today. Later in the story, Circe is required to aid in the complicated childbirth her sister experiences, when a messenger states, “she bids me tell you that if you do not help her there is no one else who can. It is your art she wants, lady. Yours alone” (90-1). This requirement for Circe to aid in childbirth directly correlates to the history of women as nurses and aids in dislodging the myth that witches are beings of pure evil with a connection to the occult. The craft that is not named is that of both the witch and the nurse, with her knowledge of herbal remedies and medical practices.

The character of Circe is known for her enchanting voice, both in Miller and Homer’s representations; it’s worth noting the art of singing also has a connection to the medical practices of early nurses. As detailed by Spearing, “In the remedy for worms for example, the physician sings over the wound. Singing and ritual feature often in Old English Hwicce remedies just as they do within the healing practices of surviving shamanic cultures” (15). This is yet another connection that Circe can have to the early form of the witch, before it became laden with negative connotations, demonstrating that Homer’s Circe can be recast and retold in a way to connect to the complicated history. Although Homer focuses on the beauty found in Circe’s voice (130), Miller instead decides to provide Circe autonomy on how her voice is used, namely providing her with a separate narrative to explore her emotions and rationale. Rather than portray her voice as an extension of feminine charm and enticement for the men who venture near the island, Miller recasts this to connect more accurately to the practice of healing whilst also permitting her to use her voice for more than charm; something which Homer’s version does not allow for.

If contrasted with *The Odyssey*, the reader gains a very different interpretation of Circe than the one Miller depicts. In fact, you would not be mistaken in assuming that Circe is weak, subservient and easily outwitted by Odysseus, albeit with the help of Hermes. In fact, in *The Odyssey*, Hermes goes as far as describing Circe’s magic as that of “black magic” (132), as well as suggesting to Odysseus: “refuse the goddess’s favours, if you want her to free your men and look after you” (132).

What is poignant in this suggestion is that Circe's power is reduced to that of condemnable magic whilst also suggesting that her identity remains as a care provider. Circe can, therefore, be easily outwitted in a fight but also still expected to provide care for Odysseus and his men in a subservient manner. Moreover, when this is added to the contrast in the confrontation between the two figures, Homer depicts Circe as submissive and weak, stating "with a shriek she slipped below my blade, clasped my knees and burst into tears" (133). Homer's Circe cannot protect herself from Odysseus, instead choosing to submit and provide them with the amenities that they need before they return on their voyage. However, what Miller is able to create is a humanised version of Circe that blends her identity as the witch/nurse as well as half-human, adding reason to her interactions and choices. When pondering the interaction of mortals with her, she states, "The fragility of mortals bred kindness and good grace. They knew how to value friendship and an open hand. If only more of them would come, I thought. I would feed a ship a day, and gladly" (161-2).

Rather than being viewed as a figure of trickery and deception, Miller's Circe retains the genuine desire to help mortals, of which she is half, not only humanising her but adding to the identity that behind Circe's hospitality comes a justifiable reason rather than portraying her as a figure to exploit and trick. When Circe is staring at men who arrived at Aea in Miller's adaptation, she states "It was my favourite moment, seeing them frown and try to understand why I wasn't afraid. In their bodies I could feel my herbs like strings waiting to be plucked." (170). Miller's Circe is a character who remains in control and this knowledge of the herbs and medicines she is able to create provides her with great strength, much like that of the early nurse Mildrýð and the recasting of her tribal name (Spearing 63). Miller, therefore, not only recasts Circe's character as one with emotion and reason but does not detract from her ability to use her magic and witchcraft at will, free from the influence and control of men.

Chapter Two – Motherhood and the Missing Witch

Witches are mostly depicted as single women who exist outside of the community, as often could be the case in real witchcraft accusations, and in popular culture, the witch rarely is seen in the role of a mother. Frances Dolan states that “many were vulnerable to accusation in part because they were not married, some of the accused were wives” (2). By extension, to be married during the period of the witch hunts in Europe was to also be expected to become a mother, demonstrating how connected an accused witch was to the institution of marriage and performing the role of the mother. Traces of such have been referenced in the previous section of this essay where in Ancient Greek culture, being childless was seen as a shocking revelation (Montesano 35). Although the figure of the witch has long been recast as an often apathetic and depraved creature of hate who is in need of redemption, recent narratives have begun to interact with these as well as the history in order to recast these memories in a more accurate retelling and to facilitate a memorialisation of the persecuted group.

As Rigney states in “Remembrance as Remaking”, “The distinction between myth and memory often correlates to a difference in temporal scale (with myths being deeply rooted in time and memory relating to the more recent past), but the crucial distinction here lies in the issue of malleability.” (243). The figure of the witch is indeed a malleable identity as she is surrounded by facts and myths, providing ample material to work with which are frequently mixed in popular culture narratives already, often misconstruing the truth. For instance, in the case of the witch’s link to motherhood, it stems from the fact that often the accused were outside of the institution of marriage and were, therefore, more susceptible to being accused of witchcraft. When art forms depict the witch now, this link is not explicitly made known, but instead has become an assumed stereotype of the witch. However, more recently this form of malleability is being practised in novels written mostly in the 2010s, reclaiming this lost history. Francine Toon achieves this in her novel *Pine* which is very closely connected to the historic execution and hunting of witches in Scotland, with her chosen location for the novel as a small Scottish village where witch-hunts occurred.

In an interview with the *Guardian*, Toon describes this intersection of myth and fact, stating:

I can see why people came up with those myths,” she says. “A friend might make up stories about a local woman being a witch, and she’d be telling this as if she was believing it herself. But even though this wasn’t true, was just children telling stories, you’d also be told a witch was executed in the nearby town. And that story would be true. The sense of the unknown, and the similarity of folklore and actual history surrounding the area, make the blending of myth and reality quite blurry. (McAloon)

As Toon suggests, myth and fact, therefore, are difficult to distinguish and whilst stories from local children can indeed be false, they can as equally be rooted in truth as is often the case with stories of the witch. Toon suggests something similar to Rigney in the difficulties in distinguishing truth from myth but it is important to reflect on the history in order to dislodge the myths of witchcraft and witchcraft accusations. As a result, it is only through the mediation, interpretation and malleability of these stories that an author can recast these tales in a way to depict a more truthful account of events. Francine Toon’s *Pine* is not immediately recognisable as a tale of witchcraft which only reflects the subtlety of myths that often begin as an obscure link to the past. However, as the novel progresses, Toon makes obvious connections to both the recognisable tropes of witchcraft as well as the myths, with the most obvious being that of the lone female who occupies a space outside of the conventional structures.

As a result, depictions of witches in popular culture have transformed the reality of single, often older, widowed women being accused of witchcraft, recasting them as villainous figures who are deserving of solitude and ostracization from society. Toon does choose to depict a mother who is also identified as a witch, but this is not in the conventional sense of the term, showing no magical powers and still depicting her as a missing mother; a connection to the witch’s historic and troubling link to motherhood. James Sharpe found that often the accused were “widows or women otherwise living outside the conventional hierarchies of family or household” (Dolan 1). If existing outside of these conventional structures resulted in the increased potential for an accusation, it is clear how being an older or widowed figure could transcend into popular culture as the stereotypical image of the witch. Examples of this recasting in other popular culture forms can be found in figures such as Mother from Disney’s *‘Tangled’* and The Evil Queen from *‘Snow White and the Seven Dwarves’* amongst other villainous maternal figures who typically are older, isolated women. In the case of *‘Tangled’*, the witch kidnaps the young Rapunzel in order to steal her youth whilst also taking up the

position of the maternal figure. Often, witches were childless and as explored earlier in the example of Circe, a lack of children in Greek culture was once a cause for fear (Montesano 35). There is undoubtedly an obvious connection to be made to those women who were accused and the fact that they were often outside of patriarchal structures, largely being accused by men. As Foucault suggested of knowledge and power, it is inextricably linked and the ability of the Church and government to exercise this power cannot be read separately from the supposed truths they were purporting.

Similarly, Julian Goodare makes this connection to those in power and those outside of the boundaries in “Women and the Witch Hunt in Scotland”, stating, “The typical witch was not only female: she was poor. But most folk in early modern Scotland were poor, and she was not usually much poorer than her neighbours. More significant is the fact that she was often an older woman, at a time when few people lived to advanced ages” (290). Francine Toon is able to take this fact and use the eery setting of *Pine* to cross over both myth and the real history of the location to depict a modern retelling that interacts with its past. Immediately from the start of the novel, the reader is introduced to the fact that the protagonist’s mother, Christine, has disappeared, leaving Lauren and her father to continue with their lives. Despite the multiple opinions from the people of the village, there remains a regular haunting from a female which occurs amidst the whispers and suspicions of the village, much like the suspicions of a historic time when women were accused of witchcraft by their neighbours. One of the first instances of this is when Lauren plays a CD; “She plays the CD in the stereo of the alcove [...] A woman’s voice wailing. She takes it out and rubs it with the sleeve of her sweatshirt. The second time around the music plays clearly.” (Toon 78). Immediately, Toon sets the scene with a connection to the spiritual and as the novel progresses, the reader learns that this voice is that of the absent mother, a recurring haunting presence in the text. Whilst Toon does break the trope and permit Christine to be a mother, as is often not the case in witchcraft narratives, she does still choose to make her an absent one, demonstrating that even in this modern-day setting a witch has a tenuous link to the maternal.

Toon is able to depict this in a modern-day environment to demonstrate this very realistic and more casual relation to witchcraft, which her daughter Lauren experiences through the family heirloom of a magical book. What Toon achieves is a connection to the local history practically and rationally and does not focus on the fantasy elements of magic, instead only showing casual connections to this past and never permitting the magic to flourish. In addition to this, several other events are dismissed by the village as nonsense despite many members of the village experiencing some of these supernatural occurrences, where one in particular directly related to the stereotypes of the witch; “we heard noises coming from her house. Cackling.”(83). Toon is able to play with the common stereotypes whilst rooting the novel in a geographical anchor to real-life witch hunts and executions, playing with the idea that stories can be transformed and cross boundaries to blur reality with fiction.

However, the most poignant and recurring element of the novel is the disappearance of Christine and it is here that Toon displays the most obvious and realistic connection to the witch’s deep history as an outsider of societal norms. The role of the mother and the figure of the witch have always been viewed as a difficult connection which frequently depicts an absent mother. As mentioned earlier in the essay, motherhood and witches directly correlate to the patriarchal structures that promote a nuclear family setup, with the witch often being ostracised from this for a variety of reasons, but mostly due to non-conformity. With popular culture depicting witches as older women, as often was the case in accusations, it becomes clear that there is a connection being made to the female body and fertility. Santos views attempts to control the female body as directly correlating to the patriarchal society, stating, “Much of this fear relates to the mutability of the woman’s body as well as their sense of sexual freedom since both menopause and infertility allowed woman to seek sexual intercourse for pleasure without the risk of its after-effects — her transgressions being written onto her body in the shape of pregnancy” (91). If the witch is also often older, widowed or without children, it becomes clear how the feat of the female body has become intertwined with notions of witchcraft and motherhood. As a result, the connection to marriage, children and motherhood is inextricably connected to the figure of the witch as she was often subject to attempts to control not

only the female body's reproductive capacity but also the right to be independent of marriage. Santos concluded that "This sense of monstrosity and mutability links back to female sexuality and a woman's ability to reproduce another living being" (92); an example of the potential danger and threat to the patriarchal and familial order. In the same way that Disney's portrayal of witches are often old, single, childless and isolated women, where even the young Circe was a figure who was childless albeit she remained subjected to the male gaze of Odysseus and his crew.

Federici explains this ostracization of older women and subsequent condemnation as witches and connects it to the development of capitalism, stating, "Older women were most affected by these developments, for the combination of rising prices and the loss of customary rights left them with nothing to live on, especially if they were widows or had no children capable of or willing to help them" (25). As a result, Toon is recasting the frequent trope of the witch as a failed mother, depicting again an absence from the family structure that was in fact, very common for women accused of being witches. However, what Toon achieves is a more casual connection to this history in a modern-day setting, playing with the notions of myth and suspicions of witchcraft that were rife in the town hundreds of years prior. Moreover, Federici rightfully suggests that "misogynous institutional policy that coned women to a subordinate social position with respect to men and severely punished any assertion of independence on their part and any sexual transgression as a subversion of the social order" (27). This dominance subsequently leads to ostracization and women who were without husbands and outside of the prime age for marriage were consequently more likely to be accused of witchcraft, with Federici explaining that "reproduction of labor power" (36) became the most important role for women. As a result, it is clear to see why witches have often been cast as problematic mother figures, as the witches were often cast out from society, were older women without husbands or the chance for marrying again and were negatively impacted by the laws and hierarchies introduced by men in power.

Depictions of witches in popular culture, therefore, do demonstrate a link to the history of witches, but it is in a way that belittles the very nature of their social position and reduces them to figures not capable of motherhood rather than highlighting their historically disadvantaged social

position and the persecution they faced. In the same way that witches were early healers in communities, this was another role that was removed from them due to “the capitalist attempt to construct a more mechanized conception of the world” (Federici 34). This institutionalisation of healing and the introduction of different laws and rights for women negatively contributed to the conditions to permit women to be ostracised from society, placing them at higher risk of witchcraft accusations. As a result, the role of the mother became even more important as an identifying role for women and to exist in a space as anything other than mother and wife was to increase your risk of persecution. Cristina Santos links this definition of witches as monsters in relation to the menstruation cycle, stating, “woman becomes dangerous, monstrous, when the patriarchal desire to harness her sexuality and reproductive powers is denied resulting in the marginalization of the infertile woman as both physically monstrous and threatening to the status quo” (91). Although Toon’s Christine is not infertile, she is a witch and has become a mother; two roles that typically are not combined in witchcraft narratives.

In a key moment in *Pine*, the connection to witchcraft is made clear when Lauren’s father thinks, “Her disappearance was the last strange thing she did [...] There is a word that he knows must float behind his back and it creeps to his mind, shamefully. Witch.” (Toon 211). It is suggested here that there were many strange things Christine did and this connects to the witchcraft accusations of the time where a woman who did not conform to the standards could be considered a witch, and even to this day, the term brings shame to Lauren’s father. Moreover, when he considers her absence later in the novel, he states, “But they treated Christine like a foreigner” (215). Toon is able to make a very obvious connection to the history of witchcraft whereby any outsider to the conventional family structure or norms would be considered a danger to the order and consequently would be an outcast. Whilst it is never clear why Christine disappeared, Toon makes a connection to the history by setting the story in a location of historical importance where the only witch is consequently treated as a foreigner and later vanishes. Whilst scholars have also linked this ostracization to the reproductive and sexual powers of the woman, Toon still conforms to the trope that a witch can be a problematic or absent mother, largely recasting the notion of witchcraft suspicions in a modern setting, but not

challenging the idea that a witch cannot be a successful or present mother. Other popular culture depictions have also performed this dichotomy, giving power to the witch and recasting the story, but not permitting them to be truly free from the tropes that have long plagued the identity of the witch, albeit with a connection to the past.

As noted by Santos, the witches depicted in the television series '*American Horror Story: Coven*' shows a retelling of the history of American witches in a modern-day environment, although they live secluded from society as a Coven. Santos states that "They also live together in a coven of women only (the only male is their butler) and they only use men for sexual pleasure. Coven also enforces the idea that, even within its matriarchal power structure, there still exists the cyclical nature of competition between women where the young woman replaces the old hag." (95). As a result, whilst both Toon and *American Horror Story* take elements from the history of witches and witchcraft accusations, they still conform to certain tropes in their retellings. In the same way that Toon plays into the idea that a witch cannot be a present mother, *American Horror Story: Coven* plays into the classical trope of the old hag and the young, beautiful woman who threatens the hag's authority. Similarly, this trope is depicted in many Disney movies, namely, *Tangled* whereby the old Mother is a witch who steals a child, Rapunzel, for her gain and to remain looking young and beautiful. This again is another example of a popular culture retelling that chooses to focus on some tropes of witchcraft that are indeed steeped with histories such as that of the coven and the history of a witch being outcast from society as an older, single woman, but retells them in a way where certain characteristics are perpetuated. Santos sees these typical archetypes as frequent characterisations of women as monsters, stating:

The old woman and/or stepmother characters are revisited and humanized; their struggle to remain part of the familial and social setting is depicted as a struggle to remain viable within the microcosm of her family as well as the macrocosm of her society—while, seemingly, at the mercy of their younger, and more beautiful and fertile, counterparts. (90)

In both Disney's *Tangled* and *American Horror Story: Coven*, this is precisely what is happening to the women, demonstrating that the struggle to remain visible in the roles of mother, old

woman and stepmother are undeniably connected to the patriarchal society which places importance on female fertility and beauty.

Whilst Toon plays into the idea that a witch cannot be a present mother, scholars have also seen this straddling of the boundaries as an important part of the history of witchcraft and their identities in cultural depictions. In *Women as Witches and Keepers of Demons*, Nathan, Kelkar and Xiaogang suggest that “it is traditionally the figure of the witch who straddles this boundary position by occupying a place between society and the known, and a space apart that is shrouded in mystery. Hence, the witch is the predominant figure of boundaries and boundary-crossing” (23). Consequently, this depiction of an absent mother who is both known and also outside of society is rooted within the history of the witches. In a similar manner to the witch straddling the boundaries of nurse and both outcast from society, there tends to be a frequent focus on this within the literature, too. Using Ann Rigney’s conclusions for remaking memories, it can be seen as an example of mediated memory in literature, whereby Toon is mediating and retelling the myth and facts she spoke of previously. Rigney states, “By mediation is meant both the channels of transmission and the very cultural forms that are used to make sense of events” (242). It is precisely this form of retelling that occurs in popular culture forms and literature which can mediate the memory of witchcraft by presenting a retelling that is rooted in parts of the history of witchcraft.

Chapter Three: Witches and the Occult

Witches were supposed to have gotten pleasure from copulation with the Devil (despite the icy-cold organ he was reputed to possess) and they in turn infected men. Lust in either man or wife, then, was blamed on the female. On the other hand, witches were accused of making men impotent and of causing their penises to disappear. (Ehrenreich and English 9)

Whilst a modern audience might perceive the witch to be a figure closely aligned with the Devil and black magic, this has certainly not always been the case, and the transformation of her into a Devil-worshipping figure is closely aligned to the battle for religious control across Europe. In fact,

even the Devil was not a feared figure until the 1400s (Levack), demonstrating that religion had a huge impact on the perceptions of evil and the subsequent persecution and execution of witches that were supported by the Church. In the first two chapters of this essay, the different roles of the witch in popular culture re-imaginings have been closely analysed and linked to the witch's complex role in social history. However, no historical connection is as poignant as that of the occult and religion. Significantly, in several cultures, the witch was recast from a figure of community healer into one that was universally regarded as an enemy of the state and the Church. Firstly, it is important to look at how the figure of the witch came to be linked to the Devil when this had not always been the case, much like how their early nursing careers were quickly transformed by scepticism and notions of evil often perpetuated by males in power who later came to institutionalise healthcare. As explained by Ehrenreich and English, "The witch-craze took different forms at different times and places, but never lost its essential character: that of a ruling class campaign of terror directed against the female peasant population. Witches represented a political, religious and sexual threat to the Protestant and Catholic Churches alike, as well as to the state" (5). As a result, the transformation of the witch into a contested figure was never a simple transformation of public opinion and instead was often the result of a multitude of factors that came from changes to women's rights, opinions on a woman's marital status and their dangerous potential to challenge and exist outside of the authority of the Church.

The level of influence that the Church had on the transformation of the witch's status in Europe is difficult to measure and study, however, it was a European-wide movement that eventually led to the term 'witch' becoming synonymous notions of the Devil and satanic worship, although the exact date of this transformation in the term is not known. As a result, Nathan, Kelkar and Xiaogang view this as; "the men who in their attempt to change an established order, denounce women, or certain types of women, as witches. The power of one section of society (men) to declare individuals of another section of society (women) as witches, is a great power that was used to change the old order and establish a new one." (59). This threat to both the patriarchy as well as to the institutionalisation of healthcare and ownership rights have been discussed in the previous chapters. However, with the recent trend to depict witches as inherently evil characters, it is more important

than ever for literature and popular culture forms to depict the connection and this transformation of the identity of witches correctly to avoid further perpetuation of these stereotypes which misremember the executions and persecution of women under the guise of a justifiable fight against “evil”. To understand how the Church came to define the witch and the hunting of them, it must first be considered how the term transformed into one that symbolised a connection to the occult, which has certainly lost some of its religious meaning in today’s culture, although this is not accurate globally where women are still hunted today (Federici 11). It is precisely this fact that demonstrates why it is important for popular culture and literature to not feed into the image of the witch that has existed for hundreds of years, as clearly it is still prominent in areas of the world. Sinead Spearing charts the transformation of the term witch more closely, noting that the term “wicce” was “generally used to describe cunning-women” (92) and therefore, was not marred with any sense of the occult or notions of evil when it first appeared in its early form. In fact, it was only through later transformations of the term and the rise of the Church’s attack on paganism that this began to change (92). In *Haunted*, Leo Braudy explains:

But as religious conflicts followed the Protestant Reformation, and an emerging nationalism, first in England and then elsewhere, began to undermine further the power of international Catholicism, the formerly local and individual nature of witches became depicted as a diabolic conspiracy with its own specific rituals— a distorted mirror of mainstream political and religious hierarchy (44).

Consequently, the witch later transitioned to be one of threat to the political and social order and was used as a symbol to further strengthen and perpetuate religious dominance across Europe. Braudy continues to explain that this developed further in the seventeenth century where the witches came to be seen as a “parallel but evil institution, as bureaucratized as the Church itself, with Satan, of course, at its head” (44). As a result, with the successful demonisation of witches came the infamous hunts, crimes and trials of the accused which popular culture has placed a large emphasis on, removing the witch from the history of religiously motivated and legal persecution of women and placing entertainment factor onto the concept of an evil figure.

In recent novels as well as in popular culture, there has undoubtedly been a trend to redefine the stereotypical depiction of the witch as a figure of evil, also reshaping the concept of the witches’

connection to the occult to provide a more historically accurate and less demonising depiction. More recent examples of this which will be examined in this essay include *The Year of the Witching* by Alexis Henderson, *Pine* by Francine Toon and notable TV programmes of recent years such as *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* and *American Horror Story: Coven*. Within each of these examples, the witch's link to the occult has been recast and has consequently aided in the reshaping of the depiction of witches in modern stories to position their connection to the occult as one of strength and individual choice rather than that of persecution and witch-hunting. These examples include a connection to the occult but they are depicted as a pool of power used independently by the witches to achieve a goal.

Alexis Henderson's 2020 novel *The Year of Witching* depicts a witch protagonist at the centre of an attempt to stop a dangerous plague amidst the crippling control of the Church who have outlawed all connections to witchcraft and magic. Henderson's novel has a very strong and obvious connection to the history of witch-hunting, specifically those initiated by the Church and begins with the backstory that the novel's Prophet successfully killed four witches to cleanse the land and free the town from evil. Born with a connection to her witch mother's diary, an outlawed object, it becomes the task of Immanuelle, the novel's protagonist, to reconnect with this history and use the witches' knowledge in order to overcome the plagues (228). What is poignant in Henderson's story is the fact that there must be an attempt to own the witch's history in order to overcome the plague, a clear connection to the need to remember the real history that is often forgotten in the public conscious. Henderson also links the power of books and knowledge left behind as a source to learn from and through the protagonist's determination to utilise this, she can succeed, demonstrating the need for books that accurately connect to the past.

Although Henderson's novel is fictional, there remains a deliberate connection being made to the real history of the witch hunts perpetuated and funded by the Church. As Rigney observes, "Memory becomes collective when it is shared, and for it to be shared it must be mediated" (242). With the rise in witch related novels and popular culture taking realistic elements from the history of the persecution of women under the guise of witchcraft, this is but one way that literature can perform

a form of mediation in the pursuit of collective memory. It is, therefore, only by taking control of the narratives that there can be any real influence on the ingrained image of the witch as a figure of hatred and malice.

Building on this connection to the history, in each chapter Henderson writes a heading, often featuring the words left behind from the fictional David Ford who was the first Prophet and Witch Hunter in the novel's town of Bethel. In particular, there is a section that connotes a similar message to that of the most infamous and prolific witch hunter in England, Matthew Hopkins, who famously wrote *The Discovery of Witches* as a guide to the county on how to detect a witch. Henderson's Ford is reminiscent of Hopkins and it is clearly making a connection to the real history that the women accused of witchcraft suffered. In one particular passage, Ford states, "The woman is a cunning creature. Made in the likeness of her Mother, she is at once the creator and the destroyer. She is kind until she is cruel, meek until she is merciless" (145). Famously, Hopkins's text begins under the misquoted religious justification that "Thou shalt not suffer a witch" whilst also stating that his text is for "The Benefit of the whole Kingdome" (Hopkins). This particular line has often been the focus of attention from scholars and even today is used around the world to justify the persecution of women. However, as Leo Braudy rightfully points out, "the Hebrew text just calls her the 'woman', and in terms of what she does – summoning Samuel from the dead – she is more like a medium" (37). Significantly, it is this collusion between the Church and state that further perpetuated and fuelled the witch-hunt craze and despite its mistranslation, even today this line has influence around the world (Federici 11). However, it is also within popular culture that this has translated into literature and film/TV, as the connection of the witch to the Devil or Satan is further adding to the idea that it is a religious fight against the occult when in fact, as stated by Levack, "The transformation of the Devil into a creature that filled Christians with fear, shock, and revulsion began in the fourteenth century" (922) and has, therefore, been created to induce fear for the purpose of a religious battle.

In a similar manner to the fictional David Ford, Hopkins did set out ways to discover a witch and these were used in many real persecutions. In fact, Hopkins describes that you can find a witch through her "Devills mark" and "three teats about her which honest women have not" (Hopkins).

Similarly, the images that David Ford creates about the duplicitous nature of women are certainly reminiscent of the hidden marks that the real Hopkins was talking about, suggesting there is always another side to women that upon further inspection, mostly conducted by men, can reveal a physical indication that they are colluding with the Devil. This fight for control through theological arguments is one that is not just about controlling the male order of power, but also who has the authority to claim a connection to the otherworldly. In his book *Haunted*, Leo Braudy defined the religious fight for control: “First was the necessity among theologians and the priesthood alike to distinguish Protestant from Catholic beliefs; the second was the need to police their own borders and assert clerical authority over who controls access to the invisible and supernatural world.” (47).

It is clear, therefore, to see how the religious battle against the witches has crossed over into popular culture when there were early forms of guides on how to detect a witch that largely focused on appearance and a connection to the Devil. In fact, it is this very physicality and duplicity of the female that has lasted and crossed into popular culture, often in exaggerated forms whereby witches are deformed, hideous and in need of execution, mostly at the hands of men. Federici views this type of connection to their bodies as:

a continuation of the demonologists’ construction of the stereotypical woman as prone to malignity, envious of other people’s wealth and power, and ready to lend an ear to the Devil. It is in this way that women have been silenced and to this day excluded from many places where decisions are taken, deprived of the possibility of defining their own experience, and forced to cope with men’s misogynous or idealized portraits of them. (47)

These idealised portraits of women that Federici speaks of are precisely what operate within *A Discovery of Witches* and also what can be seen in many popular culture depictions of witches where they appear green-skinned, conventionally unattractive and often alone; all characteristics that connect to the challenge they pose to the established order. Historically, any form of deviation from the norms and conventional idealised portraits of women could even lead to a witchcraft accusation, as noted by Ehrenreich and English where they state, “witches are accused of every conceivable sexual crime against men. Quite simply, they are “accused” of female sexuality.” (8). Nathan, Kelkar and Xiaogang view such attacks on female sexuality as “a rebellion, not by women, but by men in the process of establishing the authority of men” (59). However, it is this deviance from conventional and accepted

forms of sexuality and norms which has led to their supposed transformation of the body into something repulsive and ultimately, not fit for the male gaze or order of control.

In another of the most famous religious documents to define the witch, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, this connection between the body and expectations for femininity was also expressed. Barbara Creed summarises that *The Malleus Maleficarum*, often translated as *Hammer of Witches*, is a “series of supposedly logical reasons why women are more inclined to witchcraft than men. The reasons all relate to the classic and phallogocentric definition of woman as the ‘other’, the weaker but dangerous complement of man” (73). Religious documents undoubtedly influenced how a woman could be viewed as a witch and fundamentally, it is connected to their false propensity to be more easily persuaded to sin; sin which is often used to control sexual autonomy. Women could even be accused of performing sexual acts with the Devil, as noted by Braudy who states it could include “copulating with the Devil, kissing his ass, and other combinations of the diabolic and the sexual that are characteristic of the charge of trafficking with demons” (44). Undoubtedly, the patriarchal fear of the sexually liberal woman influenced how the Church also sought to patrol the female body as well as access to the spiritual which existed in a strictly controlled and structured manner through the Church. The existence of documents such as *The Malleus Maleficarum* and the *Discovery of Witches* makes it clear how the Church was connecting the notions of femininity to the Devil, suggesting that a woman’s body could be inspected and determined to be connected to the Devil through its appearance. When the female body has such a strong connection to witchcraft, it then becomes easier to view how witches were often connected to supposed sexual crimes against men, often relating to the phallogocentric fear of infidelity on the woman’s part, ultimately demonstrating that the concern with witches was precisely one of power in society.

If the Church was concerned with the female body and how it can exhibit a connection to the Devil, then it is important to look at how this is now presented in popular culture and literature, for the witch, as discussed earlier in the essay, has not always been viewed in this light and once held positions of considerable power. Miriam Wallraven argues in *Women Writers and the Occult in*

Literature and Culture: Female Lucifers, Priestesses, and Witches that the lack of divine feminine figures can actually be seen in the reflection of society. Wallraven states:

Therefore, if a society lacks, for instance, powerful images of the divine feminine, this will have fundamental effects on this society. For the values of a society are projected onto the divine realm, causing a process of being mirrored back to human beings and thereby influencing society with renewed inspirational potential. (139)

By extension, Wallraven suggests that due to a lack of female divine figures in society, the female connection to the spiritual world is impacted and thus, their persecution under the guise of witchcraft can also be connected to this lack of influence in the divine. With the male-dominated Church setting boundaries for what constitutes a witch under the form of religious protection, perhaps if there were more female divine figures in Christianity, their alleged connection to the otherworldly would not be policed in the same way.

Recent contemporary examples of popular culture and literature have set to reshape the female connection to the divine and the occult in order to address this lack of the female divine which Wallraven speaks of and to present the witch in a more favourable light. In particular, *The Year of the Witching* also attempts to do this through its use of the female protagonist Immanuelle and the subsequent plagues that are inflicted upon the town of Bethel. In the novel, female divine figures do not exist within their religion and are in fact, viewed as evil with many references to the figure of Mother, a convicted witch, as a source of potential corruption for the females in the town. Henderson makes this point to demonstrate and connect to the history of witchcraft and the lack of divine figures that Wallraven speaks of, as ultimately, this contempt for spiritually connected females causes the subsequent plagues which ensnare the town. As a result, only Immanuelle has the power to stop the plagues through her connection to her family's history as witches but also through her physicality, as her menstruation was the accidental catalyst for the blood plague. Henderson, therefore, quite literally connects the femininity of witchcraft to the magic and the lack of divine figures, creating a scenario where only a female character can put an end to the plague and only if she can connect to the strictly female history she belongs to.

Furthermore, with the Christian Church's focus on the feminine body as a vessel for corruption from the Devil, it is significant that Henderson uses this to connect to the plot of the novel. As Santos outlines in *Unbecoming Female Monsters*, "Not only was the Catholic Church one of the major institutions to teach men the dangers of masturbation and sodomy but also to fear women while its doctrine has also instructed women to mistrust their bodies and sexuality." (92). With the Catholic Church instructing women to be cautious of their bodies to prevent sexual promiscuity as well as the Church connecting women's bodies to witchcraft, it is clear to see how the need for control over the female body dominated ideas surrounding witchcraft and became intertwined. Ultimately, the Church's need to control the female body is one of protecting patriarchal control and access to the spiritual world and subsequently, those accused of witchcraft who often fell outside of this boundary were likely to be a victim of such accusations. Henderson's novel is, therefore, able to perform the connection to witchcraft but also allows the witch to become a figure of divine power, outside the influence of the Church, creating a situation where the ownership of female history and the female body is the solution to the plague.

This attempt to recast the figure of the witch as one of divine power, aware of her connection to the occult and as a figure who can also be a saviour is also depicted in recent popular television shows such as *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* and *American Horror Story: Coven*. These shows perform a similar recasting of the witch that Henderson achieves, demonstrating a recent trend in popular

Both are examples of modern adaptations that draw on the history of witchcraft to demonstrate that the connection to the Devil and the use of what would normally be considered black magic can be a source of power, used to attack the patriarchal structures and the Church. For instance, in *American Horror Story: Coven* the witches live in a strictly female community with the sorcerer supreme as the head of their familial unit, where they use their powers openly and obey a female leader rather than the Devil. In *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, the show's writers draw on the witch's connection to the Devil to depict that it can be transformed into a source of power in the fictional Church of Night where Satan is the head of the alternative Church and grants the witches

their powers; a connection to the historic claims that would normally have led to a witch's persecution. Instead, the Church of Night fears no outside powers and instead flourishes under the rule of Satan.

Whilst the figure of Sabrina the witch has had many reinventions, albeit mostly focusing on her as a good teenage witch, *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* is undoubtedly the most popular and most connected to the history of the witch. The show is also aware of its feminist messaging, aiming to depict a teenage Sabrina who is capable of challenging the institutions of power and even Satan himself. In a similar manner to how Henderson's protagonist Immanuelle must own and acknowledge her historical connection to witchcraft in order to save her town, so too must Sabrina who tries to balance being half-mortal and half-witch. Scholars such as Megan Henesy have viewed the show as "a dark mirror to Christian patriarchy, both legitimising Sabrina's family as "real" witches while removing much of the power of independence attributed to the image of the witch in feminist discourse" (6). Whilst the show indeed uses the fictional Church of Night to depict a mirror to Christian patriarchy, this does not necessarily diminish the independence of this reimagining of the witch in conventional feminist discourse. In fact, the new reimagining of Sabrina actually connects more strongly to the history of witchcraft and the mirrored Church acts as a critique and reflection of the persecution of witches under patriarchal Christianity. Whilst conventional feminist discourse has been focused on the witch as an independent figure who tackles and exists outside the patriarchal spheres, it is equally as effective for Sabrina to have a mirrored Church of Night with Satan as its head whereby she draws power and eventually takes control; taking ownership of the history of witchcraft accusations and using it as a source of power, independent of the Christian Church. The lack of female divine figures that Wallraven speaks of is directly challenged in the show and is, therefore, addressing this absence through Sabrina's challenge to the institution of the Church of Night; the mirrored Christian patriarchy. It is, therefore, not the Christian Church that gets to decide whether there is a connection to Satan in this reimagining, but instead, the show depicts witches pledging their allegiance to the Church of Night and gaining power on their terms and not the terms of the Christianity, thus flipping the historic rules whereby mostly men dictated the fate of the women.

Conclusion:

This essay aimed to demonstrate that the figure of the witch has a rich and varied history which is currently being reconnected to within popular culture and recent literary reimagining's from the 2010s. In particular, the chosen texts were selected as they all write a slightly different perspective for the figure of the witch, attempting to recast the figure and challenge conventional ideas. In particular, Miller's *Circe* connects to the history of nursing and herbal medicine, Toon's *Pine* depicts a modern-day retelling of the myths and connection to motherhood and Henderson's *The Year of the Witching* recasts the connection that the witch had with the religious and occult to demonstrate a feminist retelling. Whilst Homer's *Odyssey* has also been used in this essay, this has been used to provide comparison and analysis for how exactly Madeline Miller took the source material and combined it with the history of the witch to create her novel. In addition to this, some examples from film and television have been used, but have been used as a way of further reinforcing the ideas that the selected novels are showing. On some level, all of these manage to depict how the institutions of power (Foucault) had successfully managed to reshape the identity of the witch, a figure of complete creation.

Firstly, Miller's *Circe* was used to show that one of the most coveted and widely covered witches can be recast in a feminist and modern light, not only depicting her with emotions and justifications for her actions but also reconnecting her to the roots of women's roles within medicine. The character of Circe is an important figure in popular culture and history, appearing in many different art forms and being portrayed in different ways that either accentuate her threat or downplay it to the point of passivity, as can be seen in *The Odyssey* where her beauty and alluring femininity are her key features. Nevertheless, Circe has always remained voiceless until Madeline Miller's reinvention and it is through this that she is able to transform a passive figure of witchcraft into one of female power, strength and ownership of her history.

Following on from this, Francine Toon's *Pine* was chosen to demonstrate the typical witch narrative of a missing or ineffective mother. Interestingly, Toon's novel recasts this in a Scottish village that has connections to witch-hunting, significantly choosing this location for this very reason; to demonstrate at what point a myth can become a reality. Whilst anyone outside of the traditional patriarchal systems of power could be charged with a witchcraft accusation, Toon successfully demonstrates how this can transfer into a modern-day setting, with the witch mother Christine being outcast and condemned by the village for her supposed connection to the magical realm. As can often be the case in witchcraft narratives, Toon does still play into the idea that a witch cannot be an effective mother, as Christine's body is later found by her daughter, confirming her fate. However, what Toon is able to do is to show how fragile and tenuous the boundaries can be between the roles of witch and mother, demonstrating that even in a contemporary setting the witch can still face discrimination which can end fatally. Toon, therefore, recasts the typical witch story to set it in a geographical location of importance in history to show how a modern-day novel can demonstrate this link to the past.

Lastly, Alexis Henderson's *The Year of the Witching* as well as television examples such as "The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina" were used to demonstrate how the connection to the religious and occult has been used in modern stories. Whilst other examples such as that of *The Discoverie of Witches* were also drawn upon, this was to demonstrate how closely these original texts for witchcraft accusations and identification have influenced popular culture, in particular, their uses in describing what a witch looks like. However, the modern stories were able to reverse the conditions of power and instead allow the witch protagonists to draw power from the very source that has historically accused them of a connection to the Devil. This reversal acts as a critique of the Church's historic perpetuation of witchcraft accusations but also as a greater connection to the past, reflecting a more accurate version of history through literature. Both protagonists in these examples, Immanuelle and Sabrina, draw power from the condemned sources in order to revolutionise connections to the occult and save their communities. However, what is also significant in this section is how the Church attempted to control the women's bodies under the guise of protecting the population from the threat of witchcraft.

This connects to the fact that many women who existed outside of both patriarchal and religious control were therefore at risk of persecution.

Whilst there are countless examples of women rewriting the history of witches in literature, these specific examples have been chosen to highlight areas where they have successfully connected to the past. Ann Rigney's research and ideas surrounding memorialisation and memory studies have been used to highlight how it is possible in the case of the witch to use literature as a medium to challenge the current depictions and re-remember the deep history of the witch. Whilst this is not an area that Rigney specifically alludes to, her research also aims to tackle the large scale task of memorialisation of Nations and specifically, the Holocaust. Whilst the scale of witch hunts and executions are not close to the magnitude of the Holocaust, it faces similar challenges in memorialisation to avoid misrepresentation. Rigney proposes a "dynamic and generative model that sees memory as the reiterated impulse to remember the past from changing perspectives in the present" (242). Literature can aid in this as it can accurately interpret the past and combat the lasting stereotypes that have plagued the figure of the witch. Miller's reimagining of Circe is just one example shown in this essay of a successful case of dynamically remembering the past in another way in order to challenge the changing perspectives that the character faces today.

This area of academia is particularly lacking in research and this essay hoped to address a gap in investigating how literature depicts the historic mass persecution of women who were accused of being witches. Whilst there has certainly been a spotlight cast on the historical side, as evidenced by the scholars and researchers who have been referenced in this essay, there is undoubtedly a lack of material investigating how literature depicts this event. This perhaps is the fault of popular culture forms masking the true nature of the persecution of women across the world at the hands of religious and government powers, however, with a recent trend in literature, it is now more vital than ever to correctly depict and reconnect to the past. Future areas of research could certainly add to this and analyse literature and television's role in memorialising the past and recasting the figure of the witch. One such area for analysis could be the changing depiction of witches on television and film, which has only briefly been touched upon due to the primary concern of this essay being with literary

depictions. Furthermore, there are countless examples of witches in children's literature, an area that from an early age teaches the image of a witch as a figure that is capable of dark magic yet does not connect them in any way to their diverse history and influence in areas such as medicine.

As concluded by Silvia Federici, "for it is only by keeping this memory alive that we can prevent it from being turned against us" (86) and through literature, this is certainly possible. As evidenced in the handful of examples in this essay, literature is currently exploring the figure of the witch and accurately connecting it and depicting the mass persecution felt by thousands of women for hundreds of years. Through this challenge to conventional images and preconceptions of witches, it is possible to develop a deeper understanding of the witch hunts and also remove them from negative stereotypes over time so they are no longer a figure of blind hatred and dark magic, but are remembered for their healing, the resistance of norms and for the unjust pursuit to control their lives and bodies.

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